McIlwraith E-5 (1922-1924)948
NES Bellacoola NES

quantities of ducks and geese, and the inhabitants of the inland villages sometimes made hunting expeditions to the nesting places of wild fowl in the lakes of the interior uplands. Although numbers of birds were sometimes killed in this way, they were never a steady article of diet. The same is true of grouse. Always plentiful, these birds were commonly killed, but never in large numbers.

The basis of the food supply was fish. The river teemed with salmon, which enabled the country to support its relatively large population. Spring, sockeye, hump-back, dog, and coho salmon, all entered the river in thousands during the spring and summer, while the steel-head could be caught throughout the year. They were taken in weirs and their flesh smoked for winter use. Throughout the year, salmon was the principal article of diet. Second in importance was the olachen, a fish somewhat resembling a herring, which entered the river in great numbers during April or May. They were taken in purse-like nets,* allowed to rot for ten days or two weeks, and then boiled. The grease was skimmed off and kept indefinitely to be used as a relish for other foods. It was always a sign of poverty if a person were obliged to eat herring without olachen grease. Trout and bull-heads were found in the river, but were not sufficiently plentiful to be of importance.

Although no form of agriculture was practised, the Bella Coola used vegetable food to a considerable extent. Berries were abundant; some were eaten raw, but many more were pounded into a pulpy mass and dried in the sun. Cakes prepared in this way kept indefinitely and formed one of the regular winter foods. The bark of the hemlock and cottonwood was eaten, as well as the roots of many plants. In recent years many of these have not been used, so that an investigator is apt to overlook their great importance in early times. Although useless for food, the cedar was the corner-stone of Bella Coola material culture. From its trunk were split out, with wedges, the wide planks which formed

* See Appendix A for a description of olachen fishing.

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for consumers in other ways. Some are fried immediately, but the Bella Coola think they lack flavour, although most white men regard them as delicious. Many hundreds are dried for winter use in one of the following methods. 252 251

(A) Cedar-sticks, each about three feet in length, are split from the solid stem and smoothed down to a diameter of about one-half inch. One of these is passed through the gills and mouth of one fish after another until the rod is filled with a row of eulachon, their tails hanging downwards. Dozens of these sticks are suspended horizontally over the central fire in a house, or, in brilliant sunshine, hung in the open. When dried to a certain extent, they are stored in the upper parts of the houses where the process continues whenever a fire is lit. When so stored they keep almost indefinitely.

(B) Narrow strips, each four to five feet in length, of flexible cedar-bark, are prepared by the women. The fisherman takes the ends of two of these, ties one around a fish's head, and the other around its tail. Another eulachon is tied parallel to the first, and then others, until the two cords are supporting thirty to forty fish, each separated by about one inch. The middle of the strings is tied across a horizontal bar above a fire or in the open, and the process of drying continues as in the last method. The fish are subsequently smoked if a large blaze is built up in a house, as careful people remove their eulachon before a feast or other celebration.

Though dried eulachon provide a useful article for winter diet, the fish are chiefly valued for their grease, *nuk*, which is used as a condiment with all kinds of berries. It is sometimes extracted from the fresh fish, but the Bella Coola consider this to be tasteless and prefer to wait until the eulachon have remained in the pits for ten days to two weeks. Warm weather hastens the process, but in any case cooking is done until the disgusting smell has pervaded for miles, proving that putrefaction is well advanced. In former times, all boiling was done with hot stones, but as pioneer boxes with iron bottoms are used as kettles. These are of various shapes and sizes, an average being, perhaps, four feet long, three feet wide, and eighteen inches deep. These are set on fireplaces which vary according to the ingenuity of the owner. Some are excavated in the river bank, lined with stones set in clay, and fitted at the rear end with an old stovepipe to provide draught for the miniature furnace. The box-kettle is placed on the ground over the excavation and the cook pours in water. Then his wife, children, and friends bring the putrid fish, which they boil in until only a few inches of water are visible. A slow fire is built beneath, and, as the mixture begins to boil, the cook stirs it with a five-foot stick having a slightly flattened blade. Presently the grease begins to rise to the surface whence it is skimmed off and placed in recep- 252 251 [262] [263] [252] [415] [254] [415]